

# South Carolina Poised to Lead on Public School Choice

By Congressman James E. Clyburn  
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Thanksgiving week I had the pleasure of visiting Harlem Success Charter School, an elementary school in Harlem, New York. The experience was deeply emotional for me. I visited a writing class, and was intrigued by the lesson that was written on the board. The African American teacher challenged the first grade students to do some self-evaluation.

On the board was a statement the children were asked to complete and follow with an explanation. The statement was “My skin color is \_\_\_\_.” The entire student body at Harlem Success Charter School is African American. History taught me to worry about the students’ responses to the writing exercise. However, I was delighted when a young girl named Dakota shared her paper with me. In response to the prompt, she answered her skin is “butterscotch peach.” She followed by saying “It looks good. I love my skin.”

Her positive image of herself was in stark contrast to many children of my generation. Remember, I grew up just a few miles from the students involved in the *Brown v. Board of Education* lawsuit, which had its roots in Clarendon County. My family followed the trial closely, and I vividly remember Professor Kenneth Clark’s doll test with Scott’s Branch Elementary School students using two dolls whose only difference was their color. When presented with a choice between the black and white dolls, the African American children chose the white doll as the one they wanted to play with, and characterized the black doll as the “bad” doll. Professor Clark’s experiment proved the early influence of self image based on life experiences.

Obviously the children of Harlem Success Charter School didn’t have the same negative images based on their skin color. My session with some of the parents, several of whom have roots in South Carolina, other things I witnessed during my visit, and the reality of that moment were very enlightening.

The children who attend Harlem Success Charter School do so because their parents have made that choice for them. They are in an environment that is very empowering and educational. The entire program seemed geared to achieve the success the school’s name implies. This expectation is shared and appreciated by all the faculty, staff, parents, and students who choose to be a part of this public school.

I believe every parent should be given the right to choose a public school or program for their child that is the best environment for that student. For some it may be a single-gender program, a Montessori program, or an arts driven curriculum. Traditional schools may suit other children; others may opt for year-round schools. Yet in South Carolina, we have failed in empowering parents to make preferred choices for their child’s education.

I commend Education Superintendent Jim Rex’s noble effort to get our state government to implement a comprehensive public school choice program. He succeeded in getting the General Assembly to support his plan, but our Governor, whose idea of choice is sending public school funds via vouchers to private schools, vetoed the measure. Without the votes to override the veto, South Carolina failed to become one of the more progressive states on public school choice.

Yet I know this issue is one that has gained lots of support among South Carolinians. Parents are eager to find the best education possible for their children, and I am convinced, as Jim Rex is, that public school choice empowers parents to find the educational opportunities that will help their children

succeed. I know Jim Rex plans to try again this year to get the Legislature to pass a responsible public school choice plan, and I hope South Carolinians will support his effort.

We have the opportunity in South Carolina to be visionary on the issue of public school choice. We have a State Superintendent who has made it a hallmark of his administration. We have parents who are willing and eager to embrace education innovation. And we have a need to rise above the “minimally adequate” stigma that has plagued so many of our schools.

It was a black South Carolina Congressman, Robert Smalls, who first championed universal public schools. More than a century later, this African American Congressman also from South Carolina is now calling for a systemic enhancement of Congressman Smalls’ dream. We have universal public schools. Now it is time to make public school choice universal.

My experience at Harlem Success Charter School gave me hope that with dedication and innovation, we can see the same successful results throughout South Carolina. I join with Jim Rex in passionately supporting public school choice, and urge parents around the state to lend their voices to this cause. Let’s make South Carolina a leader in innovative public education.

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